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FISH OUT OF WATER: APPLYING COUNTER INSURGENCY DOCTRINE IN THE
WAR ON TERRORISM

by

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U.S. Department of State

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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03 February, 2003

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Abstract of

FISH OUT OF WATER: APPLYING COUNTER INSURGENCY DOCTRINE IN THE
WAR ON TERRORISM

As the United States wages its global war on terrorism, it would be wise to apply lessons learned in earlier counter insurgency operations. In common with many guerrilla forces, terrorist organizations require sanctuary in order to train, conduct planning, and carry out attacks. A common goal of both counter insurgency and counter terrorism is to break the link between the insurgents/terrorists and the local population in order to deny sanctuary. While there is a military component to any counter terrorist operation, a commander must also take advantage of diplomatic, information, and economic tools in order to accomplish his mission. The experience of the Philippines in fighting both insurgencies and terrorist organizations may provide some useful lessons that can be applied in the war on terrorism.

Introduction

It has become conventional wisdom to observe that the world “changed” following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the requirement to wage a “Global War on Terrorism” quickly became the guiding principal for U.S. foreign and defense policy. Were it not for the events of September 11, it is unlikely that there would today be thousands of U.S. troops in Afghanistan—not to mention many times that number assembling in the Persian Gulf for a possible war with Iraq. President Bush and others have repeatedly told the American public to prepare for a long struggle against terrorists and their supporters. America’s armed forces must be prepared to fight this new type of war.

At the same time, the days when the U.S. response to terrorism could be limited to a cruise missile strike or single punitive bombing raid are over. A more thorough response is now required. Despite this new context, it would be a mistake to begin our operational planning for the Global War on Terrorism with a blank sheet of paper and in the process forget the lessons learned over the previous centuries of our nation’s existence. This paper’s thesis is that many of the crucial practical challenges confronting the United States and its allies in prosecuting this new war are similar to those faced over the years in counter insurgency operations. As such, the operational commander needs to incorporate diplomatic, information, military, and economic tools developed for a counter insurgency context when planning operations in the war on terrorism.

To understand this linkage, it is useful to view the threat posed by Al Qaeda and associated groups as similar to that posed by communist-inspired insurgencies during the twentieth century. Both attempt to gain the support of the local population through an appeal to an overarching ideology and by demonstrating their ability to overturn the status quo through violence. The judicious application of military force is an essential component of any counter insurgency or counter terrorism strategy. At the same time, a crucial task in both is to break the link between the insurgent/terrorist groups and the local populations who provide them with sanctuary and support. To paraphrase the Maoist dictum, we need to “drain the ocean” in which the terrorists operate.

Although the terrorists’ objectives may not always include taking formal control of their host nation, they still require sanctuary in order to train, plan, and carry out operations. The experience of the Philippines, which with the help of the United States has faced both classic insurgencies as well as modern terrorist groups over the past half-century, can provide a useful case study to explore what approaches may, or may not, work in breaking this link to the population.

As a starting point, this paper looks at the basic outline of counter insurgency operations developed by the United States over the past decades. It then considers how to apply lessons from counter insurgency in the current “war on terrorism,” with a particular focus on how the U.S. should act in friendly countries that have unwillingly provided (or might provide) sanctuary to terrorists. Finally, it seeks to examine the success of earlier counter insurgency operations in the Philippines (notably against the Huks in the early 1950s) and evaluate whether these can be applied to the current operations against Abu Sayyaf and other Islamic terrorist/guerrilla organizations.

The United States and Counter Insurgency

When reviewing the development of American counter insurgency doctrine, one is immediately struck by the variety of terms used to describe the same phenomenon. One finds references in the literature to counter insurgency, guerilla war, low intensity conflict, military operations other than war, small wars, etc. There are also numerous historical examples, particularly in the last century, of American involvement in conflict at the lower end of the spectrum.¹ In many ways, the changing terms used to describe this type of operation reflect the contemporary political sensitivity involved. It should also be recalled that U.S. involvement has not exclusively been on the “counter” side of insurgency. At different times U.S. forces have themselves engaged in insurgencies either as active participants or as supporters of other insurgencies. Interestingly, the recipe for success is basically the same whether one is waging unconventional war or trying to preserve the status quo.

Despite the great degree of apparent discomfort surrounding American involvement in counter insurgency operations, in fact the U.S. track record in waging this type of conflict is actually pretty good.² From the experience in the Philippines in the 1950s to more recent successes in Central America in the 1980s, the United States has proved adept at waging war at the lower end of the spectrum. Still, to this day America’s failure in Vietnam often dominates any discussion of counter insurgency and is largely responsible for the almost reflexive aversion in some quarters to waging this kind of war.

At present, the joint doctrine for counter insurgency is embedded in the concept of Foreign Internal Defense as a subset of Military Operations Other than War. In its opening lines, Joint Pub 3-07.1 states that “the focus of all United States foreign internal defense (FID) efforts is **to support the host nation’s (HN) program of internal defense and development.**”³ As noted above, internal defense and development requires not only a military response, but the application of all the instruments of national power, with the role of the military being to provide the security environment for the other efforts to be successful. The bias (reflecting the experience of Vietnam) is strongly against involvement in a direct combat role and subsequent experience shows that direct involvement may not be necessary for success. For example, the United States was able to achieve its aims in El Salvador during the 1980s largely by advising and assisting host nation security forces in concert with generous economic assistance.

An underlying thesis is that while military action is necessary, it is not a sufficient condition for success. As one observer has noted, “a counterinsurgency effort that does not respond to legitimate internal socio-political concerns and deals only with enemy military capabilities is ultimately destined to fail.”⁴ There is also a risk that too much military (particularly if it is indiscriminate) can be counterproductive. A theme running throughout the discussion of counter insurgency operations is that “smaller may be better”⁵ when it comes to the actual employment of military forces.

Commonalities between Terrorists and Insurgents

As with insurgency, the roots of terrorism stretch back far into history. For our purposes, it is generally agreed that the seeds of the current wave of Islamic terrorist groups were sown during the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Rather than focus on the causes of terrorism, I want to highlight some of the relevant similarities between the terrorist groups linked to Al Qaeda and classic insurgencies. As one observer has noted, “contemporary terrorism is a lineal descendant of the type of low-intensity conflict seen in the Third World over the past 50 years. It is popular in part because the sorts of rural and urban insurgencies that proved effective during the Cold War are not longer as expedient as they once were.”⁶ To a certain extent, religion has simply replaced communist ideology as a motivating force for insurgency/terrorist groups. Al Qaeda has also proven adept at hijacking existing movements and using them to advance its own agenda.

In practical terms, both terrorists and other insurgencies require sanctuaries, either in their own or in third countries, preferably neighboring states. In the words of one scholar, “The thread that allows an insurgency to develop, grow and succeed is adequate freedom of action over time and space. Guerrillas maintain their freedom of action and movement through the establishment and maintenance of remote base areas, sanctuaries, and supply routes. At the same time, they establish and maintain supporting infrastructure within a population.”⁷ This can also be said for terrorist groups.

While Al Qaeda’s presence in Afghanistan was the result of a symbiotic relationship with a state-sponsor of terrorism, increasingly we may be confronted by situations in which the terrorist groups have a parasitical relationship with their host nation. The ability of the terrorists to operate will not depend on the support of the state

but on the tolerance of the local population. In these cases we will find ourselves making common cause with governments trying to reassert control over their territory and populations. As tempting as it may be to act unilaterally, long term success requires a cooperative relationship with the host government.

Even in Afghanistan, it is worthwhile to recognize that there have been different phases of the war on Al Qaeda. Initially, Operation Enduring Freedom was focused against the Taliban, who presented a more or less conventional enemy who could be attacked with “made for TV” smart bombs. Once the Taliban forces were routed, however, the conflict took on more of the characteristics of a guerrilla war. Here, a crucial task has been to work with friendly governments to separate the terrorists from the local population in Afghanistan and in Pakistan’s neighboring tribal areas. While these populations may sympathize with the terrorists, their willingness to provide sanctuary is also a by-product of their alienation from the central government in Kabul and Islamabad.

While coalition military activities in Afghanistan under Operation Enduring Freedom have had great success in eliminating the terrorist infrastructure and capturing a number of key leaders, most experts agree that the threat will remain as long as the cells and other affiliated groups continue to exist. In Afghanistan there was a belated understanding on our part of the need for a long-term presence and a strategy for countering Al Qaeda and Taliban influence among the local population. It appears that many initially thought, or wanted to think, that we could win militarily and simply walk away. There is now a realization that achieving a durable solution requires long-term investments such as building a strong central government, establishing an army, and engaging in development projects.

At the same time, there is a fear that Al Qaeda's central leadership will reemerge and reestablish itself in some other country (e.g. Indonesia or Iraq). Like a balloon, if we press down on these groups in one area they will simply spring up in another. As it evolved during the 1990s, Al Qaeda became a network of far flung radical Islamic groups in countries concentrating in Southwest and Southeast Asia. While Afghanistan served as the base for Al Qaeda's top leadership and a convenient location for its training camps, equally important to the group's strength was the ability to coordinate the activities of allied groups and smaller cells throughout the world. In order to do this, Al Qaeda took advantage of advances in global communications, including the ubiquity of satellite telephones and the use of the internet. Al Qaeda also proved adept at using the global financial infrastructure, including the informal networks that had been developed to support the expatriate workers, in order to provide funding to its operatives.

From the Operational Art standpoint, it is useful to think of what a terrorist organization such as Al Qaeda's critical factors might be in order to determine how best to counter the threat. One of a global terrorist network's critical strengths is its ability to acquire sanctuary/establish bases in a wide variety of countries. In some ways, this might also be the terrorist organization's center of gravity—its global network. If this is the case, the critical vulnerability that we may be able to attack is the support of the local population for the terrorists. Thus far, the terrorists have been able to count on at least the tacit support of the local population. One strategy for countering this is to drive a wedge between the terrorists and the local population.

While the Philippines may not be the most important branch office of Al Qaeda, there are a number of unique reasons why the United States chose in early 2002 to open one of its initial fronts in the country.

From Huks....

The experience of the Philippines presents a useful case study to compare counter insurgency and counter terrorism. The history of U.S. involvement in providing assistance to successive Filipino governments also allows us to analyze the effectiveness of external support for counter insurgency and counter terrorist operations. In many ways, governments in Manila have been basically fighting some type of insurgency for the past 50 years. This prolonged internal instability has provided an opportunity for an external terrorist group to gain a foothold. For the purposes of this study, we will begin with the effort to counter the Huk insurgency in the early 1950s.

Along with the British successes in Malaya earlier in the decade, the U.S.-Philippines counter insurgency effort against the Huks is normally seen as a great success. The Huks were communist guerillas who fought against the Japanese in World War II. Following the end of the war, the Huks faced off against the newly-independent government. Initially, the Huks enjoyed great success, particularly in Luzon province, exploiting popular dissatisfaction with the government's policies, inequitable land tenure, and the poor performance of the military.

Of particular note in the Huk counter insurgency effort is the influential role played by the United States, in particular Col. Edward Lansdale.⁸ In retrospect, the

success of the counter insurgency campaign is remarkable for its low cost and the fact that victory was achieved without the introduction of U.S. combat troops, many of whom were then engaged in Korea. The number of American advisors never exceeded a handful of military personnel and civilian counterparts. Fundamental to the victory were reforms instituted by Defense Secretary Ramon Magsaysay, including professionalizing the army, instituting land reform, and facilitating greater popular participation in government. While Lansdale deserves great credit for his role in advising his Filipino counterparts, the effort would not have succeeded without Magsaysay. This underscores the importance of local involvement, since success cannot only come from outside intervention.

Magsaysay and Lansdale were instrumental in instituting political reforms such as improving electoral oversight in order to enhance the government's legitimacy. They were likewise adept at using the psychological warfare instrument, including isolating the Huk leadership and providing incentives for defection. Lansdale had long recognized the importance of psychological warfare. As he stated in his memoirs, "the strategy of directing psychological blows at an enemy's leadership in a political war is hardly new. It is a fundamental necessity of such warfare."⁹ Behind these efforts, U.S. economic assistance to the government enabled it the fiscal space to pursue other reforms.

Years later, Huk leader Luis Taruc was willing to give credit to "Magsaysay's reforms as the major cause of his strategic defeat."¹⁰ Looking at the military dimension of the conflict, Taruc also noted that the "small hunter-killer teams then went into and stayed in the jungle" were more effective than "ponderous, multi-battalion-sized

sweeps.”¹¹ This was a lesson that the United States would forget in Vietnam but rediscover in later conflicts in Central America.

to Crooks—Counter Insurgency in the Philippines

While there have been insurgencies active in the Philippines in the intervening years, our focus here is on Manila’s current operations against Abu Sayyaf and other groups affiliated with Al Qaeda. The founder of Abu Sayyaf, Adburajak Janjalani, had fought alongside the mujahidin in Afghanistan. His group splintered from the larger Moro National Liberation Front in the late 1980s and reportedly, received funding from outsiders including Osama bin Laden’s brother-in-law, Saudi Businessman Muhammad Jamal Khalifa.¹²

Following Janjalani’s death in 1995, Abu Sayyaf reportedly began to lose its ideological fervor and became in the words of President Arroyo “a money-crazed gang of criminals.”¹³ Abu Sayyaf remained in the news primarily as a result of its criminal activities, including bank robberies and kidnappings. Abu Sayyaf has apparently enjoyed a revival in recent years in part as a result of ties with other regional terrorist groups, such as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jemaah Islamamia, which seek to unite groups into a radical Islamic state in South East Asia. This points to a growing nexus between domestic insurgency and outside terrorist groups. Another example of this phenomenon can be seen in Afghanistan, where Al Qaeda gained influence with the Taliban as the latter became more reliant upon Bin Laden’s assistance in order to continue its struggle against internal opposition.

After September 11, Abu Sayyaf was added to the U.S. list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations largely as a result of its links to Al Qaeda. Filipino President Gloria Arroyo visited Washington in November 2001 to pledge support for the U.S. War on Terrorism and to seek U.S. assistance in countering Abu Sayyaf and affiliated groups. In January 2002, the United States and the Philippines agreed to conduct six-month long joint exercises. As stated by Philippines Executive Secretary Romulo, the objectives of the Balikatan exercise were to “1. Enhance the skills and capabilities of the RP and U.S. armed forces in combating terrorism and other internal and external security threats; 2. Improve inter-operability between RP and US forces through the exchange of training skills and techniques; and 3. Upgrade the knowledge, skills and equipment of AFP forces.”¹⁴ These efforts paid off in July 2002 when Abu Sayyaf leader Abu Sabaya was reportedly killed in a clash with U.S.-trained Filipino forces.

Following the initial exercises, about 275 American troops remained in the southern Philippines to help share intelligence information and coordinate a long-term security assistance and counterterrorism program. In addition, the U.S. Navy continues to fly regular P-3 missions over the Sulu Archipelago.

Under the Philippine Constitution the active participation of foreign armies on Filipino soils is banned. As such, U.S. forces operating in the Philippines can only use force in self-defense. Recognizing the importance of local support, U.S. and Filipino counterparts engaged in a number of Civic Action activities. For example, they distributed medical supplies and materials in support of NGOs and PVOS, engaged in civil engineering projects, including the refurbishment of an airfield and port on Basilan, and upgraded roads and bridges on the island. Still, the primary focus of U.S. forces

has been on training and provision of assistance to the Armed Forces of the Philippines. In some ways, we may have been fortunate that obligations elsewhere, including Afghanistan and Persian Gulf, coupled with Filipino political sensitivities have helped minimize the number of U.S. troops.

Speaking of the overall U.S. Strategy, Ambassador Francis Ricciardone has noted that “The United States and the Philippines have been cooperating across the board to strengthen our common defense against international terrorism. That cooperation extends well beyond the traditional and most visible military training, to include great advances in law enforcement, intelligence, and financial forensics. And our cooperation in the war on poverty has also received fresh resources from the United States and fresh impetus from both countries’ leaders.”¹⁵ The Ambassador’s statement underscores the importance of combining all the instruments of national power in order to achieve unity of effort. Likewise, in a joint press conference with his Filipino counterpart, Secretary of State Powell noted that we are devoting over \$100 million in FY-02 for the war on poverty in addition to a \$55 million supplemental appropriation.¹⁶

Beginning in January 2003, 300 Filipino and 200 U.S. soldiers will take part in the “Balance Piston 03-05” exercises. For this year, at least a dozen more joint training exercises have been scheduled. USCINCPAC Admiral Thomas Fargo has noted that we will “help with the intelligence picture and aviation capability, and we will continue to shoulder the load with our AFP counterparts to help the people of Basilan and the Philippines. This means more civic action projects...and it means more medical and dental assistance.”¹⁷

Lessons Learned—How to Drain the Swamp

Watching CNN would lead one to believe that the most important blows being struck by the U.S. in the war on terrorism are precision guided munitions blowing up Taliban armor in Afghanistan or Al Qaeda operatives in Yemen. While these actions are necessary, of more importance are the less flashy activities by U.S. forces in any number of countries that are being used as sanctuary by the terrorist groups. The example of the Philippines provides an example of the type of engagement that is likely to become the norm in the war on terrorism.

While it is still too early to assess the success or failure of current U.S. policy in the Philippines, it appears that these joint initiatives are off to a good start and are correctly applying the lessons of counter-insurgency against Abu Sayyaf. First, the concept being employed by the USG adheres to the maxim of “smaller is better.” Recognizing that this really is the Philippines fight to win, our efforts have focused on strengthening our ally’s capabilities. As was the case in El Salvador during the 1980s, the American assistance programs are being spearheaded by Special Operations Forces.

Additionally, our policy has sought to mesh economic assistance with military aid while maintaining support for political reforms. The aim of these programs is to separate terrorist groups from the people. As the war moves on to other areas where Al Qaeda has its tentacles we would be well served to remember these lessons. A potential challenge will come when the U.S. seeks to apply these same approaches in countries that have traditionally not had as close relations with the U.S. and where the tools available for engagement may be more limited.

The Philippine example also underscores the importance of achieving unity of effort—both on the U.S. side as well as with our allies. Another lesson from the Philippines is the importance of good intelligence, which enables both sides to operate with fewer forces. Finally, American forces themselves need to recognize that they are in a supporting role and that their job is to help the host country forces become more effective.

There will be other challenges ahead as we move into other potential theaters. For example, the repressive nature of the governments in some of the countries we work with may become an issue. Simply assisting repressive governments because they will side with us on the issue of counter terrorism may prove to be short sighted at least, or difficult to support at worst.

Another potential stumbling block that may arise will be the question of rehabilitation of former combatants. As we have seen, rehabilitation of former combatants was an important component of our programs in Philippines during the 1950s and has continued to this day in the Philippines. While modest in terms of dollars spent, this initiative has proven to be an important incentive in helping to undermine the hold of the insurgencies on its membership. In other projects, for example counter narcotics activities, the U.S. also provides assistance to those whose behavior we are trying to influence. It is not clear whether this approach could translate to the war on terrorism. Key questions that would need to be addressed include the following: Are terrorists impossible to rehabilitate? If the leadership cannot be rehabilitated, can the rank and file members?

Conclusion

While there have been many successes to date in the war on terrorism, both from a military as well as intelligence/law enforcement perspective, it would be naïve to think that we are in anything other than the opening phases of this struggle. As the war moves from Afghanistan to the jungles of the Philippines or the mountains of Pakistan, we would do well to remember the lessons learned during earlier counter insurgency campaigns. Success in the war on terrorism will depend in large part on our ability to harness all the instruments of national power to work with friendly governments to drain the oceans in which the terrorists currently operate. In this, the military has an important role to play in conjunction with the other instruments of national power.

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NOTES

¹ An early example of U.S. involvement in “small wars” was the U.S. experience of forces under Brigadier John Pershing fighting an insurgency in the Philippines from 1899-1902. See Anthony James Joes, America and Guerrilla Warfare. (Louisville, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 103-131.

² Ibid., 4.

³ Joint Pub 3-07.1, Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Foreign Internal Defense (FID). (Joint Electronic Library (CD-ROM) 1996),vii.

⁴ Max G. Manwaring, Internal Wars: Rethinking Problem and Response. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001,10

⁵ John D. Waghelstein, “Ruminations of a Pachyderm Or What I Learned In the Counter-Insurgency Business.” Small Wars & Insurgencies, (Vol.5, No. 3, Winter 1994), 361.

⁶Max G. Manwaring, The Inescapable Global Security Arena. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002), 6

⁷ Manwaring, Internal Wars, 10.

⁸ Lansdale was the basis for the title characters in both William Lederer and Eugene Burdick’s “The Ugly American” and Graham Greene’s “The Quiet American”

⁹ Edward G. Lansdale, In the Midst of Wars: An American’s Mission to Southeast Asia. (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 375.

¹⁰ Waghelstein, 365.

¹¹ Ibid., 366.

¹² Victorino Matus, “Return to the Philippines,” The American Spectator (Sept/Oct 2002), 28

¹³ Ibid., 29

¹⁴ Alberto G. Romulo, (Remarks (as prepared) at Closing Ceremonies, Balikatan 02-1, Zamboanga, Republic of Philippines, 31, July 2002) <<http://www.pacom.mil/speeches/sst2002/020731romulo.htm>> [10 January 2003]

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